

Lowell's International Institute: 75 Years of Community Service

An Exhibit by the International Institute
of Lowell

PATRICK J. MOGAN
CULTURAL CENTER



Working People Exhibit
June 30 - August 30, 1993
Wednesday - Sunday
10:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m.

40 French Street, Lowell, Massachusetts

The International Institute of Lowell

Imagine finding yourself in a strange new place. You sold everything for a chance at a better life in a new country and all that you own is in the bags resting at your feet. You are not familiar with the language, customs or laws. What you wish for is a friendly face... a friend to help you get started. For 75 years, the International Institute of Lowell has been that friend, helping immigrants adjust to life in their new home.

International Institute Movement

The International Institute of Lowell is one of many International Institutes across the country. The first International Institute began in New York City in 1910 as an experiment by the newly organized National Board of the Young Women's Christian Association. The YWCA at this time recognized that the demographics of its constituency had shifted. The earlier immigrants served by the "Y" were of Protestant background. By the beginning of the century, however, there was an increase in the arrival of non-Protestant immigrants. It was felt that these particular women would be more willing to take part in the activities of a non-religious organization. In order to serve these new immigrants and not conflict with the religious mission of the YWCA, International Institutes were separately formed.

The driving force behind this movement was a young social welfare and settlement worker named Edith Terry Bremer, who understood the needs of the immigrant. Educated at the University of Chicago and a veteran of the Chicago Women's Trade Union League and the Immigrant Protective League, Bremer was recruited in 1909 by the National Board of the YWCA to direct the agency's work with immigrant women and girls. She envisioned the International Institute as a service oriented agency designed to protect immigrant women, address



The YWCA building on John Street was the first home of the International Institute

their problems, and help with their adjustment to life in the United States. Bremer believed that this new program should recognize the importance of the immigrant community in the life of the immigrant girl. She cautioned against the dangers of isolating the individual from the community and of straining relations between the generations. "The community," wrote Bremer, "must be understood, sympathized with, and dealt with as a part of treating the individual."

Bremer understood that individuals rooted in the cultures and languages of the immigrants would be the most trusted and effective. For this reason, she advocated that the workers be recruited and, if necessary, trained from those communities being served. These workers became known as "nationality secretaries."

Because of its YWCA sponsorship, Bremer felt that the Institute should provide a complete program for the immigrant girl by offering not only English classes, but all the activities of a regular local YWCA, adapted to the needs and interests of the foreign born. By the time of the first World War, this "experiment" had become an integral part of the YWCA and spread to other cities across the United States where major immigrant populations resided.

The Founding

As early as 1914, the Extension Committee of the Lowell YWCA began working with immigrant women by concentrating on recruiting new members from those working at the local textile mills. The goal was to reinforce Protestant principles for Protestant women and to convert others. The mill agents, for their part, felt that this work was beneficial to their interests. Their belief was that if the immigrant was involved with the YWCA, she was less likely to be a problem and therefore would be a better worker. With the mill agents' permission, the YWCA was allowed to conduct English classes during lunch time, organize clubs, hold meetings and conduct periodic lectures. These activities proved somewhat successful in drawing recruits to the YWCA. Once at the YWCA, the new members could continue to learn English, study homemaking and citizenship, and receive help with health and personal hygiene.

In December of 1915, the Northeast Field Committee, a regional arm of the YWCA's national office, held a conference that recognized New England's unique situation. The committee found that New England, with its large immigrant population, needed to put special emphasis on recruiting and working with immigrant women employed in the mills.

The national office sent representatives to Lowell to help organize the local efforts. It was hoped that with changes at the local level, there would be an increase in the number of volunteer workers, thereby



An Americanization class from the Suffolk Mill, ca. 1924

reducing costs for administering the programs. It was also hoped that with an increase of volunteer workers more women could be reached.

By the time of the first World War, about one million immigrants a year were coming through Ellis Island. With the war there were new problems to be addressed. Unfortunately, not all those who needed help would come forward to ask for it. The issue of religious direction became a barrier in reaching those in need. With the help of funds from the War Work Council of the YWCA, Lowell's chapter of the International Institute was officially created on May 1, 1918.

The Work

Until "suitable headquarters" could be found, the International Institute operated out of the YWCA building on John Street. It also hired its first employees to work with Greek and Polish women. Work started slowly. According to the Greek worker's semi-monthly report, average attendance in the classes was only eighteen.

By September of 1918, the International Institute had moved its office to 25 Palmer Street. At this new location, the Institute conducted cooking, sewing and canning classes along with English and Americanization classes. The regular casework of the Nationality Secretary included medical, employment and legal advice, as well as house calls and referrals. By the end of 1918, the number of nationalities reached by the International Institute rose to seven.

The Institute continued to grow after the war. In addition to the regular casework done by the



Nationality Secretaries, the Institute conducted summer picnics, camping parties for girls and an exhibition of handicrafts from many of the ethnic communities serviced. In 1925, the International Institute held the first of its many festivals, the *Homelands Exhibit and Festival*, promoting the diverse ethnic culture that Lowell contained.

In the *Annual Report* of 1928, casework was divided into five categories:

- 1) Migration Service
- 2) Naturalization
- 3) Interpretation
- 4) Legal
- 5) Medical

It was also noted in that Report that the Institute was not an agency for relief. Its mission was to cultivate cooperation with other agencies and act as a resource in directing individuals to the proper relief agency. This report, though not intentionally, guided the International Institute's operations for the next sixty-five years. The organization continued to provide referral services for the needy, conducted educational and citizenship classes, encouraged the formation of ethnic clubs, and worked toward obtaining citizenship for both women and men.

In the 1930s, funding for the Institute became harder to obtain because of economic conditions across the country. In addition, where there was once great cooperation between the manufacturers, the YWCA, and the International Institute, there was now

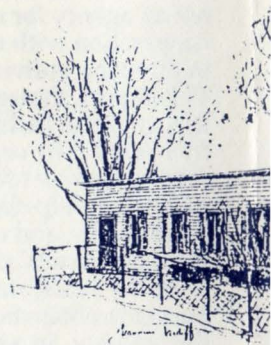


A group of campers at Camp Munasaka in Westford, an International Institute sponsored summer camp

animosity. The YWCA had become more active in women's rights and issues over the years, and defended women in their struggle for better working conditions. The manufacturers looked upon this as a threat to their interests and considered the YWCA a troublemaker. The International Institute, as an arm of the YWCA, found that without the funding and cooperation of the manufacturers, their work was going to suffer. Also, because the mission of the Institute had broadened to include men, the International Institute became an independent organization in 1935.

As an independent agency, the International Institute continued to serve the immigrant population of Lowell as it had in the past. It became the leader in promoting ethnic pride with cooking demonstrations in the 1940s and 1950s, and international folk festivals in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. These years also brought to Lowell refugees, war brides, displaced persons and relatives of those already residing in the United States. With each situation, the International Institute acted to assist immigrants with their problems.

Today, the International Institute remains an important part of an immigrant's life. In addition to translating documents and providing social service referrals, for many it is the first step in becoming an American citizen. Throughout its 75 years, the International Institute has never lost touch with its original mission: to be a friend to a stranger in this country. And, if each person in Lowell who was affected by the Institute could be counted, it would fill - *a city*.



The International In

Exhibit Staff

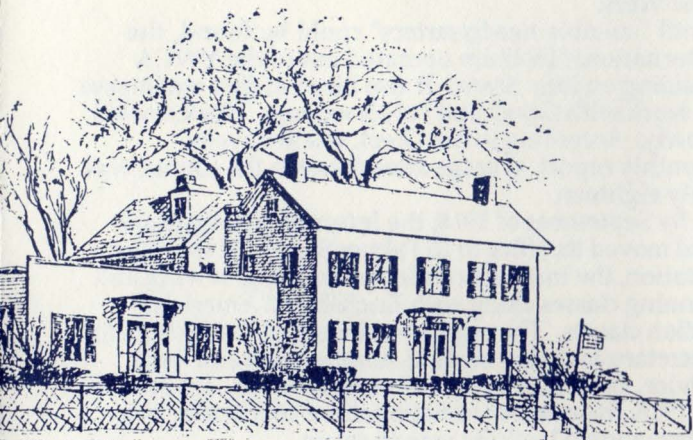
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Acknowledgments

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Lowell Office of Cultural Affairs
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for Lowell History



Institute today - The Institute's present home at 79 High Street

THE PATRICK J. MOGAN CULTURAL CENTER

The mission of the Patrick J. Mogan Cultural Center is to "tell the human story found in the history of the United States as an industrial nation, especially by concentrating on the lives of the working people of Lowell, Massachusetts." The Center, which opened in 1989, is named in honor of Lowell's former Superintendent of Schools who developed the concept of an urban park focused on Lowell's unique heritage.

This former Boott Mills boardinghouse, built around 1837, was rehabilitated by the Lowell Historic Preservation Commission, an agency of the U.S. Department of the Interior. It is an appropriate setting for the Lowell National Historical Park's interpretive exhibits on the theme of the Working People: Mill Girls, Immigrants, and Labor. A wide variety of cultural programs is offered here throughout the year. The Center also houses the University of Massachusetts at Lowell Center for Lowell History, and the University's Downtown Center for Continuing Education.

LOWELL HISTORIC PRESERVATION COMMISSION

The Lowell Historic Preservation Commission was authorized in 1978 "to tell the human story of the Industrial Revolution in a 19th century setting by encouraging cultural expression in Lowell." Its historic preservation program works to preserve historic buildings and create a recreational trail along Lowell's canals. Its cultural programs interpret the Commission's themes through public art, performing arts, cultural grants, exhibits, conferences, publications, folklife, oral history, ethnic heritage and labor projects. For further information, call (508) 458-7653.

LOWELL OFFICE OF CULTURAL AFFAIRS

The Lowell Office of Cultural Affairs co-sponsors temporary exhibits at the Mogan Cultural Center through its Cooperative Agreement with the Lowell Historic Preservation Commission.

The mission of the Lowell Office of Cultural Affairs (LOCA) is to identify the ways and means to expand cultural opportunities and choices. LOCA manages the Lowell Museum Cultural Fund which provides a financial resource for those who create, present, and preserve the culture of the city through exhibits at the Mogan Cultural Center. For information or to receive The Local, a bi-monthly calendar of Lowell events, call (508) 459-9899.

TEMPORARY EXHIBITS

Any organization, group, or individual interested in developing an exhibit at the Patrick J. Mogan Cultural Center on its themes, should contact the Lowell Historic Preservation Commission at 222 Merrimack Street, Suite 310, Lowell, MA 01852, (508) 458-7653. A staff member will send you an application and if approved, your proposal will then be recommended to the Mogan Community Advisory Board.